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Growing Pains and the Zen Rx: Surviving Success after the 6-Year Mark

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Abstract

Subsequent to participating in the 2006 National Summer Institute on Learning Communities sponsored by the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education at The Evergreen State College, J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College's Learning Communities Team spent the next several months preparing the college for a fall 2007 launch of learning communities. In the ensuing semesters the learning communities' initiative has experienced healthy, although not always consistent growth and refinement. Reynolds and its LC initiative are herein examined as an organic entity embodying interrelated needs for growth, equilibrium, reflection and sustainability. The Reynolds Learning Communities Team participated in the National Learning Communities Conference in November 2012, including providing a concurrent session presentation, "Growing Pains: Surviving Success after the 5-Year Mark." In "Growing Pains and the Zen Rx: Surviving Success after the 6-Year Mark," two of the team members update the 2012 presentation and take it to the next level through the perspective of Robert M. Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*.

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Cover Page Footnote

We extend a special "thank you" to the learning communities students at Reynolds for granting us permission to use their testimonials pseudonymously.

This story of the learning communities initiative at J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College in Richmond, Virginia, provides a case study of how a program evolves and grows within an actual college environment. Along the way some unexpected surprises have demonstrated how a learning communities initiative learns to adapt to the ebb and flow of its environment. These reflections and ruminations on how a program grows organically—how even bumps in the road (for instance, no external funding) can be turned into home-grown opportunities—will provide reassurance for beginners that there is light at the end of the early years of development. Every learning community initiative and every learning community is indeed unique, and we can all learn from each other's stories.

Mountains should be climbed with as little effort as possible and without desire. The reality of your own nature should determine the speed. If you become restless, speed up. If you become winded, slow down. You climb the mountain in the equilibrium between restlessness and exhaustion. Then, when you're no longer thinking ahead, each footstep isn't just a means to an end but a unique event in itself. This leaf has jagged edges. This rock looks loose. From this place the snow is less visible, even though closer. These are things you should notice anyway. To live only for some future goal is shallow. It's the sides of the mountain which sustain life, not the top. Here's where things grow. But of course, without the top you can't have any sides. It's the top that defines the sides. So on we go... we have a long way... no hurry... just one step after the next. — Robert M. Pirsig in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (pp. 198-199)

Charlie: Lately I've been thinking a lot about the above passage from *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, which I read in the 1970's. I enjoy strenuous hikes in the mountains as long as they don't require specialized gear such as harnesses, ropes, grappling hooks, tents and carrying in food supplies. Recently I've attempted to focus on this quote when climbing or swimming and the going becomes tedious. Rather than concentrating so much on finding a way to quickly attain the summit, I attempt to focus on where I am in this moment, on how my surroundings appear, on what a magnificent animal the dog is in this sylvan setting. If I'm swimming, it's easy for the laps to become monotonous so I try to think about how this particular stroke feels, what my hands are doing, do I need to put more lean into the strokes, am I getting sufficient oxygen.

Miles: Pirsig's idea comes to me, when I'm lucky, on the golf course, on those all too rare occasions when I'm in the zone and I accept the game's eternal truths: (a) you get out of golf what you put into it; (b) golf never really gives you more than you can handle; and (c) sometimes golf gives you far more than you deserve.

Charlie: Perhaps I'm out on a limb here (maybe a "ledge" is a better analogy), but I believe this quotation also has application for our work with learning communities. Reynolds' start-up Learning Communities Team's experience at the 2006 National Summer Institute on Learning Communities at The Evergreen State College (Evergreen) was very Zen-ful, considering the setting in the Northwestern US forest and Evergreen's emphasis on environmentally sustainable practices and education, innovative pedagogies, and respect for Native American culture. The practice of learning communities embraces inclusiveness, diversity, active engagement, and a basic belief that the student's intellectual functioning can be improved.

Miles: It's taken some patience, courage, and vision for our college to embrace such a mindful approach to learning communities. We used to joke, half-seriously, that the best thing that happened to our fledgling LC initiative was *not* getting Title III grant funding in 2007. The absence of an ironclad plan for implementation and sustainability, and most of all, the sense that we could grow the initiative organically, as slowly (or quickly) as it needed to grow—these were the sides of Pirsig's metaphorical mountain (or our swimming or golf strokes) that have sustained us on our journey.

The interest in learning communities at J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College finds its roots in the BASE (Basic Academic Skills Education) project in the mid-1980s on into the early 1990s. BASE was a Title III-supported initiative that linked English/Reading courses with a Student Development (SDV) study skills component and included Academic Support Services and professional development for the involved faculty, many of whom remain at the college and retain a positive institutional memory of this learning community-related initiative.

In 2003, Dr. Gary L. Rhodes was inaugurated as third president of Reynolds and *Student Success* was subsequently adopted as the ultimate goal of all college initiatives and endeavors. When the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE), which provides data and analysis about student engagement in community colleges, was administered, Reynolds fell short of

several national and state benchmarks, which prompted an extensive research effort by the college to find strategies to help students persist, succeed, and return from semester to semester. Outcomes of this research effort included:

- development of Reynolds' Student Success and Retention Model,
- improvement in linking Student Affairs and Academic Affairs,
- renewed focus on and commitment to professional development for faculty, and
- a recommendation that learning communities be initiated as a leading methodology to incorporate best practices for student success and retention.

Learning communities are defined as curriculum change initiatives that link or cluster courses together around themes and enroll a common cohort of students. While LCs' structures and adaptations include a variety of approaches to this linking or clustering, they have two common intentions. First, they attempt to provide coherence for students by linking classes together and building relationships between disciplines or skills within a discipline. Second, they seek to build both academic and social community for students by enrolling them together in a large block of coursework in contrast to course-by-course enrollments in which students may not interact with the same students and/or faculty members as they move from one course and academic term to the next (MacGregor, Smith, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2002). Tinto (1993, 1997) found that student integration into the college experience is primarily achieved through interactions with peers and faculty, student persistence is positively correlated with such integration, and LCs are purposefully structured to increase student-to-student and student-to-faculty interaction. For many faculty, the creative work of designing an integrative curricula and the engaged student learning that results are worth their collaborative efforts (Lardner & Malnarich, 2008). Many postsecondary institutions operate LCs to promote students' involvement and persistence/retention in college (Scrivener et al., 2008). Cross (1998) summed up the growing interest in learning communities, citing three broad categories: *philosophical* (because LCs fit into a changing philosophy of knowledge), *research based* (because LCs fit with what research tells us about learning), and *pragmatic* (because LCs work).

This year Reynolds' offering of learning communities observes its sixth anniversary, and, in retrospect, we realize we've come a long way. Many of the original members of our Learning Communities Team (LCT) who participated in the 2006 Evergreen experience—the steering committee for the LC initiative and one of Reynolds standing strategic priority committees—remain on the team. The task of helping Reynolds' students develop reliable information networks (Karp, Hughes, & O'Gara, 2008) that progress into engagement and a sense of Reynolds-

affiliated community is a role assigned to several of the College's units, including the LCT; consequently, membership composition is purposeful. LCT membership for 2013-14 includes: Dr. Eric Barna, Director of the Center for Teacher Education; Pat Bozeman, Coordinator of the Academic Support Center; Dr. Barbara Glenn, Dean of Humanities & Social Sciences; Dr. David Loope, Vice President for Academic Affairs; Sarah Shutt, Counselor for Retention; Dr. Miles McCrimmon (outgoing Reynolds Faculty Learning Community Facilitator and Professor of English); Pamela Lamb, Marti Leighty and Dr. Steve Brandon, teaching faculty; Jena Morrison, Reynolds Faculty Learning Community Facilitator; and Charlie Peterson, Director of Learning Communities and Assistant Dean of Educational Support Services. The LCT's goals for developing community and engagement among our students are achieved through planning and offering of a variety of opportunities for student participation in LCs and through providing unique opportunities for the professional development of the faculty teaching these LCs. The LCT continues to make progress in weaving LCs, linked courses, and interdisciplinary faculty development into the learning environment and educational culture at Reynolds.

Our long-term goal has been to align student opportunities in the community college with the opportunities afforded by residential colleges and universities. From the outset, we targeted a sizable population—primarily the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System [IPEDS] cohort of 18-year-old to 19-year-old first-year, full-time liberal arts/social sciences and/or non-curricular students—who would benefit incrementally from an LC experience, persist through their second year, and complete the Associate's Degree. Early in the LC initiative (2007), we invited Dr. Scott London, a professor at Randolph Macon College (RMC) in nearby Ashland, to talk with our faculty about RMC's First-Year Experience program because RMC's incoming freshman class is about the same size as this cohort of Reynolds freshmen. We learned that while RMC needed several years to recruit, develop, and incentivize enough faculty members to offer LCs for its entire class of approximately 400 first-year students, enrolling their "captive audience" of freshmen was a snap. Our experience would prove to be the reverse: faculty members lined up for the privilege of teaching an LC, but it would take several years to build the institutional mechanisms to co-enroll our population of entering students.

Growth in numbers has been important during these first years of the LC initiative, if only to preserve and build on the momentum, enthusiasm, and commitment among early-adopting faculty members. For the last three years we've been running approximately 350 to over 400 co-enrolled LC students each fall semester. The availability of LCs at Reynolds helps to bridge the gap between the commuter, two-year college experience and the residential four-year college in terms of giving our students similar learning experiences to those of their

former high school colleagues. The college and its LC initiative has achieved this level of service, not so much in a rushed, top-down manner but rather through contemplative steps, taking notice of our institutional environment and frequently adjusting our course along the way.

Early on we were cautioned about not “requiring” too much from college resources, e.g. asking too much from program heads in terms of course sections from their specific disciplines and making adjustments in efficiency requirements, such as minimum class sizes. Following our first two summers of providing faculty training institutes, annual budgets have been modest but probably reasonable, considering the other needs within the college. On the other hand, there have been those times when the institutional desire was to move forward, speed up, create more capacity, and offer more learning communities. It has been strategically important to maintain equilibrium between institutional restlessness and exhaustion of resources.

Among our longer term goals is that of transitioning the status of learning communities from a special initiative to a more institutionalized component of the college, including practices and expectations that run deep in the institutional fabric. We wanted to witness a transition from hearing people talk about LCs as a problem (or at least as the latest new administrative headache) to seeing them raised as a solution. Evidence of progression toward this goal occurred in the early spring of 2012 when Dr. Eric Hibbison, program head for developmental English and one of Reynolds’ well-seasoned pedagogists, approached us about offering LCs modeled after the then-upcoming Virginia Community College System (VCCS) re-engineered developmental English. Four of these 8-credit LCs were successfully launched in fall 2012, followed up by five sections in the new English Foundations (ENF) format in spring 2013; more are planned for fall 2013.

Another indicator of the continuing institutionalization of LCs is the adoption of the LC format by the Reynolds Advance College Academy (ACA), a concurrent enrollment partnership that provides an annual cohort of participants the opportunity to complete an Associate Degree while still in high school. Starting with the first cohort in summer 2013, rising high school juniors in the ACA were co-enrolled in two sections of a new Personal and Community Health/Student Success Skills LC as the kick-off to their two years of concurrent enrollment as juniors and seniors. By the time other ACA cohorts in the service area begin their curricula in 2016, we’ll be offering at least six sections of these LCs every summer. Starting in fall 2013, this Health/Student Success paradigm has taken off as an LC with our native Reynolds students, offering a convenient way to satisfy the General Education requirement in Personal Development with one paired set of courses.

Back on the high school campus where the ACA is now in place with the first cohort of juniors, cross-disciplinary partnerships have emerged among high

school faculty members in English, History, and Psychology, who are sharing the same small group of 50 full-time students. Senior-year LC partnerships are in the works among faculty in Statistics, Biology, Political Science, and Literature. While we have encountered challenges co-enrolling our somewhat more unpredictable, part-time adult population, the ACA’s captive audience of high school students is providing a fertile testing ground for our LC philosophy.

An additional significant point of light illuminating our progress in embedding LCs into the institutional culture of the college occurred in 2012 when the LCT accepted an invitation to travel to Indianapolis to share what we have learned at the 17th Annual National Learning Communities Conference hosted by Indiana University Purdue–University Indianapolis (IUPUI). There, several members of the LCT examined the initiative’s “growing pains” at the five-year mark, explored the tension between restlessness and exhaustion, and ultimately argued for an embrace of the “happy accidents” and “unforeseen benefits” that come from an open-ended, organically grown initiative.

Information in WEAVEonline (software designed to assist with institutional planning and reporting to align program- and institutional-level quality improvement processes in the context of accreditation) and in our annual report to the Reynolds Leadership Council (one of Reynolds’ standing governance councils) indicates that the learning communities initiative has progressed well since the first LC offerings in fall 2007. The initiative has enjoyed growth from one year to the next in terms of numbers of LCs offered and faculty and student participants (see Figure 1 below).

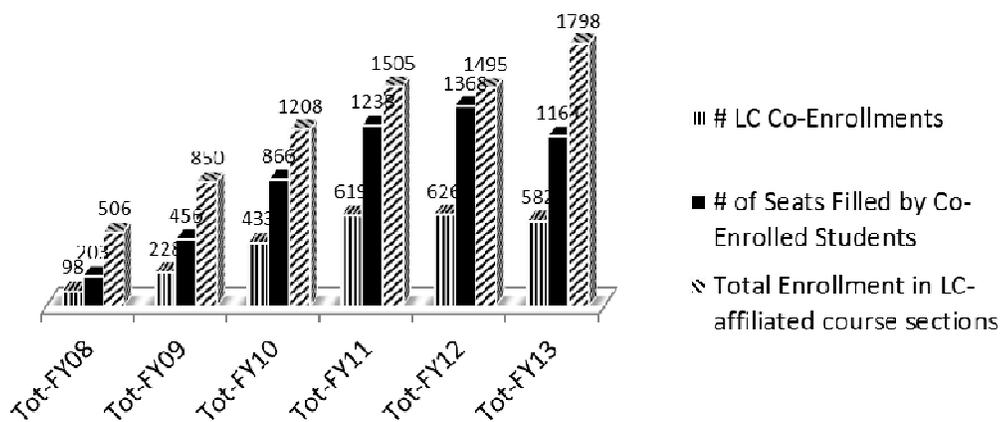


Figure 1. Growth of Reynolds Learning Communities

Faculty report that they are increasing and improving their pedagogical skills, as well enjoying the experience of doing something innovative and interacting with other professional colleagues and students in a different way:

I enjoyed it. I think it's a good step for the college to focus on student engagement and experiment with ways to make the curriculum more real to people. There were positives and negatives about the way it worked out for the students... I feel as if they sometimes don't much care to see what's behind "Oz's" curtain, and to some extent would rather just show up, be told what to do, and remain anonymous than to take more active roles of being part of a "community." But I think that being in the community was an opportunity to get students discussing more meta-cognitive issues that they would not otherwise think about.
– Robin Brownhill, Adjunct Instructor of English

We talk a lot about audience analysis in writing courses, but I think few of us understand that our discipline and curriculum have audiences which go well beyond students. Teaching in an LC teaches one to appreciate and better understand this audience and their expectations of the discipline, all while giving those in other disciplines a better understanding of just what they can expect from us. In other words, there's no way to interact without exploring borders and border crossings.
– Steve Brandon, Associate Professor of English

We've measured LC-affiliated students in several ways and received consistently encouraging results in metrics such as retention, persistence, satisfaction, etc. Other assessment instruments have demonstrated that Reynolds LCs improve student persistence, challenge our most motivated students to go further in their thinking than they would have in isolated coursework, allow faculty to "team up" to concentrate and "triangulate" on struggling students who might otherwise be "invisible," and encourage faculty engagement with new teaching strategies. Faculty tell wonderful stories of their students' experiences related to the LCs they are teaching:

We have also found that LC teaching partners with different personalities, learning styles, or teaching methods creates a special dynamic that benefits the student learning that occurs as well as enhances the experience for the faculty in that learning community. When a student approaches one faculty member with concerns, these concerns are often experienced in the other class as well. This allows the first faculty member to make use of this teachable moment and advise the student on how to succeed in both classes with both types of instructors. And, joint office hours allow for both faculty to help

address these concerns together with the student as well create a place for discussion between the instructors that can allow them to grow their own skills on dealing with this situation both within and without the classroom.

– Jena Morrison, Student Success Coach for Early Alerts and LC
Faculty for Student Success Skills and Sociology

Students confirm these perceptions with testimonials of their own:

This was my first time having classes that really coincided with each other. I loved how one day we would discuss something or get assigned a project/homework in English and the next day we would talk about how to get the best grade possible on the assignment in SDV. It really helped me out a lot because I felt like I had support in both the classes. Being in a Learning Community has improved my progress in both the SDV and English classes. – Liz

Both in Sociology and in English I have found myself, for the first time, open to the discoveries of knowledge that college can provide. As I have come to realize, college is not about grades or tests (though their importance is not lost on me), but rather being able to open your mind to the possibilities of further ways of thinking... I have learned more about myself in four months than I had in the previous twenty-one years. – Joe

Within the first five minutes of my first class, my professor was talking about this "learning community" thing and this class being a class on *me*. Never before have I received a letter grade on the subject of myself... But what greater motivation is there for work than yourself? I mean, I've been punching in and out at work for years because I have to make money so I can eat. But the thought of punching in and out for yourself is much more satisfying. That's the most exciting aspect of college so far...Right now we are our own majors. – Josh

Perhaps it is these testimonials from students about "turning the corner" on their academic careers and, yes, even their lives, that offer some of the most compelling testimony as to "why learning communities."

Conclusion

In a community college setting, LCs may not be for every student, but there is a subset of students who can benefit significantly from the LC experience and the opportunities it offers for engagement and collaboration—opportunities that are offered to first-term, 18-year-old and 19-year-old liberal arts students attending four-year colleges and universities. Presently we are offering 20–25 fall LCs (or 40–50 LC course sections, illustrated in Figure 2 below); these provide ample seats for this cohort as well as seats for other students who do not fall into this grouping but who nevertheless choose to participate in a learning community environment.

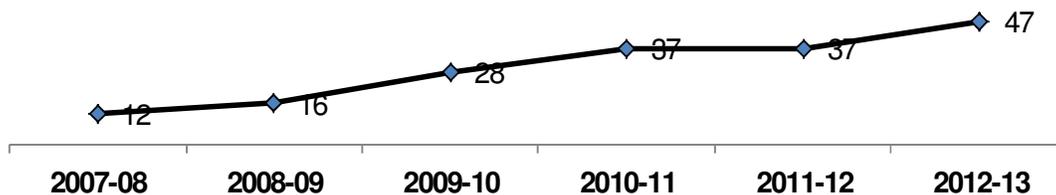


Figure 2. Annual Number of Reynolds LCs

The main benefits to the college and its students include improved student and faculty engagement and retention. Four consecutive years of fall-to-fall retention studies reveal that LC students' retention results are higher than that of a control group of the general student population of first-time, curricular students at Reynolds. As might be expected, results have varied over these years, yielding anywhere from a 5% to a 20% increase in the retention rate for LC students when compared to a similar population of non-LC-affiliated students.

Other, often unexpected, benefits have flowed from the LC initiative. Besides the aforementioned creative connections to developmental English and the Advance College Academy, a pleasant surprise has been that about half of the nearly 100 LC faculty members have been part-timers, often drawn to LCs as a way to showcase their innovative teaching ideas while forging important collegial relationships with full-time faculty partners. In fact, several of these adjunct faculty members have joined the full-time ranks, at least in part as a result of their LC teaching. LCs have provided for stronger ties between full-time and part-time faculty as well as professional development opportunities for both groups.

LCs have proven a good testing ground for many cross discipline collaborations; some have worked well while others may not have worked as well. Nonetheless, the LC initiative lends support to a college-wide commitment

to innovation and the use of a decision-making process to bring about improvements in student success. From the outset, Reynolds has viewed the LC initiative as an investment in a cultural shift toward more student engagement and strategic partnerships between and among faculty across the disciplines—not LCs for their own sake, but LCs for the sake of various college goals and priorities.

From this perspective, we can't quite see the top of mountain or know how things will be when we get there. Trudging uphill can be slow going at times, but the will to move forward often appears in unforeseen places. We learn what we can along the way and apply these illuminations to the journey.

So on we go... we have a long way to go ... just one step after the next, attempting to strike equilibrium between restlessness and exhaustion.

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